

INTO THE EYE OF THE COMMANDER: MILITARY ADVISORY DURING CONFLICT

BY

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**INTO THE EYE OF THE COMMANDER:
MILITARY ADVISORY DURING CONFLICT**

by

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ABSTRACT

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Since the Second World War, the United States has struggled in the development of indigenous militaries during the course of and following wars in foreign lands. Despite numerous language, cultural, funding, and organizational challenges, US Forces have historically prepared foreign national forces with aplomb, but have also fallen short in several areas. The US experience in three conflicts—the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and Operation Iraqi Freedom—underscores many of these successes and shortcomings. While US Commanders have sometimes included this effort in their operational approach, it is vital to securing a successful conflict termination.

INTO THE EYE OF THE COMMANDER: MILITARY ADVISORY DURING CONFLICT

Neither honour, nor patriotism, nor generous superstition, could animate the lifeless bodies of slaves and strangers, who had succeeded to the honours of the legions...A reformer should be exempt from the suspicion of interest, and he must possess the confidence and esteem of those who he proposes to reclaim.¹

—Sir Edward Gibbon

Conflict termination is one of the most complex aspects of war and also generates the most far reaching effects. As a nation achieves its military end state by imposing its will upon the adversary, the greater problem of turning a military success into a strategic victory arises.² This becomes readily apparent in the immediate and urgent need to provide security for the civilian population in occupied territories as the key factor toward stability in the aftermath of conflict. To advance our national interests, the United States has proclaimed it will commit military forces only “in a way that reflects our values and strengthens our legitimacy...”³ Fundamentally, nation-states have attempted to wager ways, means, and ends in order to advance their relative positions of power and influence among the international community—ratcheted by their willingness to hedge risk in order to achieve their aims.⁴ Commanders then translate this type of strategic guidance into their operational approach, a concept that US joint doctrine describes as a “visualization of how military operations should transform the current conditions into the desired conditions at end state.”⁵

As we enter the 21st Century, where post-colonialism, religious fundamentalism, and resurgent nationalism have erupted across the globe, American troops are seen less as liberators and increasingly as unwanted, occupying forces. This development has posed added difficulties for the United States to achieve stabilization in various

regions. With operational approach in mind—and in light of this change of the perception of American troops—one of the critical programs that the United States has endeavored to leverage toward conflict termination is the training and advising of foreign military forces. This enterprise has grown in scale and scope and has proven to be pivotal to achieve a strategic victory. “Advising has evolved from ill-organized military mercenary units to professional, government-sponsored teams oftentimes driven by a desire to cultivate political and economic influence.”⁶ Indeed, the purpose of advising and training efforts spans the gamut of such purposes as nation-building, modernization, strategic engagement, ideological penetration, counterinsurgency, and even profiteering. Ultimately, the United States seeks to enhance the military capabilities of our allies, friends, and partners in order to underwrite collective security in regions of vital interest.

Despite numerous language, cultural, funding, and organizational challenges, US Forces have historically prepared foreign national forces with aplomb, but have in some cases fallen short of our stated aims. The US experience in three conflicts—the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and Operation Iraqi Freedom—underscores many of these successes and shortcomings. These conceptual and historical analyses will provide a backdrop against which I shall determine if the United States has provided the necessary training, preparation, and guidance for our servicemen to succeed in this pivotal effort. While US Commanders have sometimes included this effort into their operational approach, it is vital to securing a successful conflict termination.

Development of the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA)

In the aftermath of the Japanese surrender in September of 1945, both the United States and the Soviet Union confronted an uncertain landscape in Northeast

Asia. First, China continued to struggle through a bloody civil war between Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists and Mao Tse-tung's Communist forces. Second, the political landscape of post-war Japan remained uncertain as differing factions debated between democracy and communism. Third, the US and USSR considered the plight of the Korean Peninsula, agreeing at the Yalta Conference to establish a trusteeship over Korea.⁷ Having been annexed into the Empire of Japan in 1910, Korea had ceased to be a sovereign nation for more than thirty years. Accordingly, the victorious powers decided to re-create Korea and split it into two zones of occupation, similar to what they planned for post-war Germany. In August 1945, based on a proposal from US Army Lieutenant Colonel Dean Rusk, the US and USSR agreed to two such zones along the 38th Parallel, with Soviet troops occupying the northern zone and US forces the southern zone.⁸ But the Korean people were underwhelmed with this 'trusteeship,' which looked to them much like colonialism just under a different name. Amid the increasing polarization of the population, both zones enacted elections in 1948, resulting in the two separate political entities we have today [the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) or North Korea and the Republic of Korea (ROK), also known as South Korea]. At this time, the US forces nurtured a burgeoning Korean Constabulary Force of nine regiments to maintain general police and law enforcement.⁹ Focused largely on events in Europe, the USSR informed the US that it planned to withdraw all Soviet troops from Korea by the end of 1948.¹⁰ "It was announced subsequently that the withdrawal of American troops would be completed by the end of 1949, except for a 550-man group of US Military advisors who would remain in Korea continuously for the training of the ROK armed forces."¹¹

This nucleus of advisors came to be known as the Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG), and their charter was to professionalize and grow the Constabulary Force into the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA). KMAG worked with Korean officers who had been trained by the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) to organize a basic ground force of eight infantry divisions, armed largely with obsolete American equipment left over from World War II.¹² Almost immediately, the Americans found themselves tackling not only training and organization, but other missions to include nation-building and counter-insurgency.¹³ Coupled with this was the total lack of American familiarity with Asian cultures in general, and to the Koreans in particular.

By any measure, Korea was a tough assignment. Considering the extra burden of being the only American living and working with Koreans without any linguistic or cultural preparation, little material support, and a motivated but demanding boss, it is amazing that so many advisors not only were successful, but even thrived in this most challenging environment.¹⁴

The Koreans emulated every aspect of their American instructors, and struggled through the numerous language and cultural differences. Basic military doctrinal terms and concepts such as ‘machine gun’ or ‘phase line’ had no natural equivalent in the Korean language and thus had to be improvised—and often not in a standardized way.¹⁵ Oriental pride or ‘face’ greatly complicated the advisor’s role. Americans soon discovered that correcting or even suggesting alternate techniques to a Korean officer or NCO in front of his troops resulted in that leader’s public humiliation.¹⁶ The American advisors recruited Korean officers from the very limited pool of war veterans. In some cases, these Koreans had fought each other while serving in the Chinese and Japanese armies, respectively. Similarly, in the newly formed ROKA, even those with combat experience had to unlearn the parade-like precision of IJA drills and adopt the

innovative—and often unwieldy—American practice of fire and maneuver.¹⁷ Slowly, but methodically, the ROKA learned and then adopted American-style heavy weapons tactics and even squad through battalion level maneuvers by March 1950.¹⁸

Thus on the eve of hostilities, the ROKA was progressing well, but was still far from a battle-worthy force. First, the ROKA struggled with manning issues; although the ROK government enacted conscription in the fall of 1948, units still suffered acute shortages due to deferments, bribes, and inefficiencies.¹⁹ US Ambassador John Muccio addressed this issue with South Korean President Syngman Rhee; manning improved, but remained a war-long issue for the ROKA.²⁰ Second, defensive preparations along the 38th Parallel lagged far behind what the ROKA and KMAG had planned. The ROK National Assembly balked at funding these preparations as a cost-saving measure. Third, the ROKA had only a modest panoply of equipment, to include .30 Cal machine guns, mortars, 105mm artillery, and very few aircraft.²¹ All of these conditions indicate a serious underestimation on the part of the US and ROK decision makers with respect to North Korean capabilities—which were fashioned after the Soviet Army. The ROKA sought to emulate everything American, viewing imitation as the key to success. Ultimately, KMAG chief BG William L. Roberts forbade his advisors from “trying to turn the Koreans into Americans.”²²

Once the North Koreans invaded in June 1950, the United States led the international support for South Korea. General of the Army Douglas MacArthur became the Supreme Commander of United Nations Forces—a coalition that eventually encompassed troops from twenty-two different nations. MacArthur took the approach that these UN Forces, together with the ROKA, and augmented with US naval and air

assets, would close with and destroy the North Korean army. The ROKA would concurrently contend with insurgents and subversives in South Korea and in occupied North Korean territory. Despite his contention over these modest limited objectives, MacArthur never re-framed his operational approach, nor did any of his successors.²³

Despite years of training with its American advisors, the ROKA met only limited success against the communist tide. Despite sustaining tremendous casualties in the western part of the country, the ROKA performed superbly in the mountainous eastern portion.²⁴ North Korean forces—known as the North Korean People’s Army (NKPA)—rapidly exploited success by targeting ROKA units, who often proved unreliable under fire, largely due to poor officers. “Many ROKA soldiers were eager to stand and fight, but they didn’t know how or where; they were leaderless.”²⁵ US advisors clamored for better selection of leaders. Following the amphibious landings at Inchon and the ensuing exploitation northward in the autumn of 1950, the ROKA demonstrated its versatility in quelling the anxieties of the North Korean citizens as UN troops moved north. However in late October, when Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) intervened on a massive scale, ROKA units were among the first to break and retreat south.²⁶ US advisors began to train consolidation and counterattacks.

Despite fighting outnumbered and outgunned, the ROKA still had not earned the trust of the Americans—a perception that US advisors worked diligently to change. MacArthur opined that “ROK Army troops were neither of sufficient strength, nor sufficiently well led to handle the situation, and were effective only when integrated with US forces.”²⁷ US advisors implemented several initiatives to improve the ROKA. First, advisors selected the best ROKA officers to train in the United States where “...they had

learned to employ infantry in Georgia and to aim cannon in Oklahoma.”²⁸ Second, harkening back to his experiences as a senior US advisor during the Greek Civil War, the new Eighth Army Commander, General James Van Fleet, established the Korean Field Training Command in July 1951. Here US advisors led ROKA regiments through a nine-week program of individual and collective training.²⁹ Incrementally, and under the baptism of fire, the ROKA began to gain proficiency. By 1952, the ROKA had made up for shortages in firepower with a penchant for closing with the enemy; they counterattacked with stubborn resolve, repeatedly throwing the CCF back time and time again.³⁰ The new chief of US advisors, MG Cornelius Ryan, oversaw a massive expansion of the ROKA training base, to include eighteen separate installations to house officer professional schools, branch schools, and NCOES.³¹ In May 1953, Van Fleet planned a ROKA offensive along the east coast to complement his own Eighth Army attack in the west; the ROKA was partly successful, slowing in the tough mountainous terrain.³² Despite the Chinese propensity to target the South Korean units during attacks, the ROKA staved off the final full-fledged CCF offensive in July 1953.³³ Ultimately, it was this very hardening and proficiency of the ROKA that convinced the Communist Chinese to agree to the terms of the Armistice in July 1953.³⁴

What worked well for US advisors and what did not? First and foremost, American advisors trained the burgeoning ROKA for contingencies across the spectrum of conflict; from counterinsurgency to nation building to synchronizing fires to planning and conducting counterattacks, the Americans prepared their South Korean counterparts for all eventualities. Second, advisors encouraged the ROKA to adopt a comprehensive approach to force structure across what we now call Doctrine,

Organization, Training, Materiel, Logistics, Personnel, & Facilities (DOTMLPF); by war's end, the ROKA created contracting agencies, food procurement procedures, tactical training centers, and hospital care for disabled veterans.³⁵ Third, the selection of leaders continued to be a long-term problem. Following the custom of many imperfect democracies, the ROK Government combined political preferment with military preferment. "The politicians in primitive societies want no generals they cannot trust. They prefer a politically reliable man at the head of a division to a competent one who may happen to belong to the wrong family."³⁶ Family is germane to one's position in a Confucian society. Therefore, this selection of officers is something the ROKA has grappled with until fully adopting a promotion meritocracy in the 1990s. Fourth, an effective working relationship between South Korean President Syngman Rhee, US Ambassador John Muccio, and Generals MacArthur and later Ridgway provided an executive forum to discuss the needs and performance of the ROKA.³⁷ In abundance, the American advisors, despite an environment of poverty, corruption, insurrection, and isolation, helped to develop an effective fighting force that had to contend with sedition, rebellion, and invasion. It is a great testimony to both the Korean soldiers and their US advisors that the ROKA performed so well in the most trying conditions. While this conflict is technically still afoot, the US advisory mission to the ROKA has played a significant part to the cessation of hostilities, working toward conflict resolution.

Misfire with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)

Originally supporting our French Ally in her quest to maintain overseas colonies, the United States soon found itself involved in another protracted conflict in Asia. The 1954 Geneva Accords fractured French Indochina into Cambodia and Laos and further sub-divided Vietnam along the 17th Parallel into a communist north and a democratic

south. The Viet Minh—now called the Vietnamese Communists or Viet Cong—had resumed the struggle as a war of national liberation.³⁸ This time, the communist aggression was not as acute, nor was the commencement of hostilities quite as pronounced. In sharp contrast to the high-intensity conflict that erupted in Korea, the Viet Cong instead prosecuted an insurgency designed to erode and incrementally seize power in South Vietnam. In this struggle, the communists sought to mobilize the peasantry, create an anti-imperialist liberation front, cache munitions and supplies, train in sanctuaries, and select the times and locations of contact.³⁹ Although the United States policy in Vietnam morphed several times during our years of involvement, the one overriding tocsin that rang true for the entire duration was that of containment.⁴⁰

As President John F. Kennedy took office in January 1961, these insurgencies in Laos and South Vietnam had begun to take an ominous turn. Fearing both nuclear and conventional parity with the Soviet Union, Kennedy identified counterinsurgency as an arena for the United States to gain an edge.⁴¹ The President dispatched Professor Walt Whitman Rostow and General Maxwell Taylor to South Vietnam to assess conditions on the ground; they returned and recommended a significant expansion of American involvement, particularly in the area of military advisors.⁴² In response, the Kennedy Administration accelerated the American-sponsored counterinsurgency campaign.⁴³ President Kennedy more than tripled the number of military advisors from 900 to over 3000 and approved clandestine operations in Laos and North Vietnam. He “decided that he had no choice but to make Southeast Asia the place where he would prove that ‘wars of national liberation’ could no longer be won,” setting an example for countries in Africa and South America as well.⁴⁴ In short, the President envisioned the United States

preparing the South Vietnamese to contend with, and then to defeat, this new aspect of the communist menace.

Against this backdrop, the US advisors surprisingly began to develop the competencies of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to meet a conventional, vice an insurgent threat. Why was this so? Many of the lessons from the Korean War remained fresh in the minds of American Servicemen. “As for the defense against guerilla forces, the model provided by the defense against North Korean guerillas prevailed. Little or no attention was paid to the problem of combating guerilla forces in an insurgency.”⁴⁵ Like they had in Korea, the US advisors again viewed the insurgency as a prelude to conventional invasion, this time by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Meanwhile, although the ARVN had learned the French reliance of defensive warfare, reaction in a tactical environment, and caution with insurgents, their American advisors now began to speak of different tactics and a different way to think about warfare.⁴⁶ The Americans “...emphasized combat, set-piece battles between organized units as the centrality of conflict. Americans also put a high priority upon the use of firepower and high mobility, both controlled by a sophisticated communications system, as a means of assuring that decisive combat is achieved in the field.”⁴⁷ The US Army, searching for continued relevancy in a nuclear-dominated strategic landscape, was quick to demonstrate that conventional limited wars along the periphery maintained significance; somewhere lost in this organizational objective is the fact that the Army (and the Marine Corps) had underdeveloped, outdated, and oversimplified counterinsurgency doctrine.⁴⁸ Thus, by placing organizational objectives ahead of

political guidance, the US Army prepared our Ally for a kind of war neither envisioned by US political leaders, nor predicted by the intelligence community.

Amid this cognitive dissonance, two unexpected events suddenly took the conflict in directions previously unanticipated by the participants. First, the South Vietnamese generals staged a coup on 1 November 1963, seizing power and executing President Ngo Dinh Diem along with his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. This greatly troubled President Kennedy, who feared political chaos in Southeast Asia. Second, within three weeks of this, Kennedy himself was shot and killed in Dallas on 22 November. Without ever having explained to his successor, Lyndon Johnson, his vision of conflict termination, "Kennedy undoubtedly harbored deep-seated doubts about the prospects for success in South Vietnam, and he had adamantly opposed the commitment of US combat troops."⁴⁹ The first of the unanticipated results of these two assassinations was the decision by the North Vietnamese to accelerate the tempo of their war of national liberation in 1964.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, in Washington DC, men such as Walt Rostow, Maxwell Taylor, and William Westmoreland convinced the new president that American air power was the last unplayed trump card and to embark on a strategic bombing campaign of North Vietnam.⁵¹ Johnson agreed to this proposal, and as an adjunct to assisting the South Vietnamese, he also authorized yet another increase of US advisors.

When Eisenhower left office, there had been a few hundred American advisors in South Vietnam; at the time of the Rostow-Taylor mission, there were 1,364; by the end of the following year, 1962, there were nearly 10,000; and by November 1963, there were 15,000. Equipment, especially helicopters, came in at a faster rate.⁵²

By the summer of 1964, this number had increased yet again by 30 percent, from 16,000 to 21,000.⁵³ The war that no one wanted was widening.

The performance of the US advisors, while thorough and well-received by the Vietnamese on the one hand, generally tended to be maddeningly frustrating on the other. General Donn Starry remembers that “no advisor was really prepared for the cultural, climatic, and professional shock that awaited him when he joined a South Vietnamese unit.”⁵⁴ Again language became a central issue. Norman Schwarzkopf, then a captain, was handpicked as an advisor to an ARVN airborne battalion because he could speak French.⁵⁵ The Vietnamese learned readily from their American advisors. Although extremely proficient in the care and repair of weapon systems and equipment, the ARVN struggled with coordinating fire support and air, often relying on their US advisors to perform these duties.⁵⁶ The US advisors to the incipient South Vietnamese Air Force fared no better. Many spoke derogatorily of their counterparts and, even worse, treated them like impoverished children. Likewise, the Americans displayed a chronic impatience in obtaining results, which in many cases led to a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure on the part of the ARVN.⁵⁷ Ultimately, the reports written by these advisors led US higher commanders to dismiss the possibilities of relying on the ARVN to accept a greater responsibility for defeating the communists.

Beginning in 1965 and through 1968, the Commander of US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), General William C. Westmoreland, Americanized the war. Turning largely to American infantry units, Westmoreland’s approach was to conduct ‘search-and-destroy’ operations against communist camps, bases, and units in South Vietnam. He continuously clamored for more combat troops—which in turn prompted the communists to escalate in kind.⁵⁸ Under the pretext of securing US airbases, the United States deployed an increasing number of Soldiers and Marines, and

Westmoreland, alarmed by the slow ARVN buildup and fearful of an enemy offensive in the Central Highlands, concluded that to avert disaster, the US “had to put our finger in the dike.”⁵⁹ This last statement encapsulates Westmoreland’s ignorance of the second two aspects of the three-part war: pacification and territorial security.⁶⁰ Instead, he remained focused on the first: “the war of the big battalions...Simply stated, his intention was to inflict on the enemy more casualties than they could tolerate.”⁶¹ During this process, Westmoreland discounted the nearly 600,000 strong ARVN, refusing to assign them responsibility for defeating the NVA.⁶² Sounding reminiscent of MacArthur and Ridgway, Westmoreland “doubted the battle-worthiness of the ARVN... [which he] largely shunted aside, relegated to lesser operations and population control, chores its officers considered demeaning and took on with considerable reluctance.”⁶³ Several senior American officers cautioned that this was not the correct approach, to include Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Earle Wheeler, Army Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson, and retired Army General Maxwell Taylor.⁶⁴ Even the normally reticent General Matthew Ridgway stated that “The emphasis should not be on the military destruction of the communist forces in the South, but on the protection of the people...tactically, this would involve a shift in emphasis from ‘search and destroy’ to ‘clear & hold’ operations.”⁶⁵ The end result of Westmoreland’s operational approach was, by 1968, an ARVN more dependent than ever on US assistance and one that was ill-prepared to assume the full burden of fighting both the NVA and the Viet Cong at some later date.⁶⁶

Within this approach and during the high-tide of American involvement (1965-1968), the role of the advisors was one of frustration at best. Owing to the lack of focus

from the US commander, the advisors often found themselves unsupplied, uninformed, and uninspired. Struggling to teach the ARVN to close with and destroy enemy forces, US advisors reported their counterparts stationed near populated areas, assuming primarily defensive roles; this stasis resulted in fewer and fewer direct actions against the enemy. US advisors pleaded with the ARVN chain of command to get these units into action with the NVA, only to learn, surprisingly, that MACV did not endorse this view.⁶⁷ US advisors “stoically endured the harsh climate and the dysentery (promptly dubbed ‘Ho Chi Minh’s Revenge’), confident that they were not only defending Vietnam against a communist takeover, but also preparing themselves for wars of the future.”⁶⁸ US advisors had to likewise struggle against the oligarchy and especially with the rampant corruption. South Vietnamese government officials gouged bribes for driver licenses, passports, visas, and work permits; they also extorted kickbacks for contracts to build and service facilities in support of the ARVN.⁶⁹ Coupled with these cultural differences, both the Americans and the Vietnamese approached each other in unawareness. One advisor remembers: “My time in Vietnam is the memory of ignorance. I didn’t know the language. I knew nothing about the village community...I knew nothing about the aims of the people—whether they were for the war or against the war.”⁷⁰ Equally naïve were the Vietnamese perceptions of the American culture; while the Vietnamese people gladly accepted US aid—especially material goods—they almost universally knew nothing about America or its ideals. These myopic perceptions fostered a mutual mistrust and a refusal to share intelligence. “The unerring ability of the villagers to avoid mines and booby traps that killed and maimed GIs led to charges of collusion with the enemy.”⁷¹ Worst of all, the Vietnamese slowness to accept

American methods exasperated US advisors.⁷² The inescapable desire to create a little US Army was still alive and well. Concurrently, Westmoreland's approach to Americanize the war "made it almost impossible for the vital political effort...to deal with whatever made so many Vietnamese ready to wage or support a revolutionary war."⁷³

With the election of Richard Nixon to the US Presidency in late 1968 and the replacement of Westmoreland by General Creighton Abrams in early 1969, however, the war took a new course. Nixon and his Administration concluded that all of the Kennedy and Johnson assumptions about the war in Vietnam had been proven wrong—and costly.⁷⁴ "In the chaotic period between Johnson's abdication and Nixon's succession, the American country team had put together a set of programs that constituted 'Vietnamization.'⁷⁵ By teaming with US Ambassador to Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker and CIA Chief of Station William Colby, Abrams forged a leadership triumvirate that developed a theater strategy which supported President Nixon's policy and engaged with South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu.⁷⁶ While Nixon sought 'peace with honor,' Abrams immediately re-framed the approach along the concept of 'one war.' "He [the enemy] knows there's no such thing as a war of the big battalions, a war of pacification, or a war of territorial security," Abrams asserted. "There is only one, repeat one, war."⁷⁷ Rejecting his predecessor's 'search and destroy' attrition concept, Abrams focused immediately on 'clear and hold,' with special emphasis on protecting the population. The US forces would target enemy base camps and logistics caches in small-unit actions while the ARVN sought to fight the decisive battles.⁷⁸ William Colby became the director of Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS), the ambitious US effort of nation building in South Vietnam; this agency, having been

previously uncoupled, now fell under MACV supervision.⁷⁹ In this regard, Abrams endorsed the role of the Regional Forces and the Popular Forces (RF and PF)—components of the Territorial Forces whose mission was to remain in their home provinces and districts to provide local security.⁸⁰ Abrams realized that the RF and PF enjoyed the confidence of the people and might well turn the political nature of the war in favor of the Republic of Vietnam by securing the population. With US forces keeping large enemy elements away from the pacification areas and subordinate American commanders reluctantly accepting their new role, even State Department officials noted that Abrams understood the war far better than Westmoreland did.⁸¹

Concurrent with the pacification effort, US advisors “worked frantically to build up and modernize the ARVN.”⁸² Following a tactically successful but politically disastrous foray into Cambodia in 1970, the ARVN and its American advisors consolidated in the Central Highlands and prepared for another new initiative. This test came during February 1971 in the form of an ARVN raid into Laos—without US ground forces—dubbed Operation Lam Son 719.⁸³ Although the ARVN inflicted tremendous casualties on the NVA and destroyed a significant portion of the enemy sustainment base, the ARVN proved incapable of cross-border operations without US airpower.⁸⁴ Despite dwindling resources and operating within an ambitious US drawdown plan, Abrams and his team by 1972 “had achieved the objective of enabling the South Vietnamese to defend themselves.”⁸⁵ In April 1972, the NVA launched twelve divisions into South Vietnam in a conventional attack known as the ‘Easter Offensive.’ “ARVN divisions stiffened with an emergency infusion of American advisors...and fought the NVA to a bloody standstill.”⁸⁶ But the Paris peace talks prompted the Americans to continue their

redeployment. When the US Advisors finally left in January 1973, the ARVN was the fourth largest military in the world.⁸⁷ Yet this did not prevent its ultimate collapse in 1975.

Although the United States dedicated thousands of servicemen in advisory roles and spent huge amounts of money to improve the ARVN, the advisory mission could not prevent the catastrophe. Many scholars have suggested that the US constructed the ARVN too much in the likeness of the US armed forces, yet Lewis Sorely argues persuasively that this is simply not so.⁸⁸ Others, like General Roy Doughty, contend that the US prepared the ARVN for the wrong kind of war, focusing too much too early on conventional and too little too late on counterinsurgency.⁸⁹ Larry Cable contends that training a foreign force while in contact with the enemy is risky:

No one appeared to question the possibility of training an army that was also engaged in constant combat operations. The United States should have learned this in Greece or Korea where the attempt to train and fight simultaneously almost lost the war for the government forces.⁹⁰

Still others, most notably George Herring, contend that the US missed the importance of the village in the fabric of Vietnamese life.⁹¹ In any event, despite the great efforts of the US advisors and the heroic actions of the ARVN, we misfired on the training of this force to prepare it to protect its nation or to secure successful conflict termination.

In the Sands of Babylon: Rebuilding the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)

Three decades later, with specter of Vietnam still occasionally haunting American politicians, policymakers, and servicemen, the US decided to end the regime of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and establish a democracy in the Middle East. After more than a decade of UN sponsored economic sanctions, several military actions, and condemnation by most of the world, Saddam remained ever defiant, particularly when bludgeoning his Kurd and Shi'a minorities or answering allegations of his weapons of

mass destruction (WMD) program.⁹² US President George Bush worried about Iraq's linkage with the Al Qaida terrorist network, which attacked the US on 11 September 2001. As early as December 2001, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld ordered the Commander of US Central Command (CENTCOM), General Tommy Franks, to update OPLAN 1003V to feature a 'running start' to military operations in Iraq.⁹³ President Bush gave the order on 19 March 2003 to commence hostilities with Iraq in order to topple the regime.⁹⁴

Following an astonishingly successful invasion of Iraq by American and British conventional forces, Saddam's regime wilted and disappeared within three weeks time. Although many units of the Iraqi Armed Forces chose to disband rather than fight for the oppressive dictator, numerous packets of Iraqis in civilian clothing, fought fanatically against coalition forces.⁹⁵ These irregular elements were part of the Sunni-dominated Fedayeen Saddam, a paramilitary organization loyal to Saddam Hussein.⁹⁶ In a similar fashion, Shi'a militia and Kurdish separatist groups rapidly emerged. Concurrently, a whole myriad of groups—ranging from pan-Islamists to criminals, from mercenaries to nationalists—violently opposed the US presence. Soon, these disparate irregular forces created an insurgency that spawned sectarian violence, something for which the US forces and their coalition partners had not prepared.⁹⁷ Still, the US pressed forward by disbanding the Iraqi Army and removing any loyal Saddam Iraqis from high positions in public works and government.⁹⁸ Sadly, this refutes the lessons learned in post-WWII Germany, where General Eisenhower adopted a 'bottom up' approach of de-Nazification to keep society functioning.⁹⁹ With the rapid de-Ba'athification of all aspects of Iraqi society, the situation eroded into chaos, looting, and general lawlessness.¹⁰⁰

To restore order, the Bush Administration turned to retired Army Lieutenant General Jay Garner to head the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance to Iraq; part of its mission was to train the new Iraqi Security Forces.¹⁰¹ Similar to William Colby's CORDS in Vietnam, Garner's organization also had the additional mission to conduct nation building in a country with a destroyed infrastructure and no rule of law. After Garner yielded to L. Paul Bremer and the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in May 2003, the CPA fumbled through a whole year before creating Multi National Security Transition Command – Iraq (MNSTC-I) under then-Lieutenant General David Petraeus in June 2004 to oversee the development of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).¹⁰² US advisors quickly found that they had numerous missions, to include directions to “limit collateral damage within cities, provide medical treatment to wounded enemy combatants, and distribute large quantities of Iraqi government surplus food.”¹⁰³ US forces organized their advisory teams into small, task organized entities—military transition teams (MiTT), national police transition teams, border transition teams, and embedded training teams—in order to shape this daunting task.¹⁰⁴ Initial reports from the field “underscored how difficult the advisory task was—and how lengthy the job of producing effective Iraqi forces was promising to be.”¹⁰⁵

In order to prepare US Soldiers and Marines for this lengthy advisory job, the Americans had by 2005 stood up training centers at Forts Riley, Polk, Hood, Carson and Camps Lejeune, Shelby, and Atterbury, specifically geared to the advise and train missions. Future US advisors engaged in “staged scenarios with role players from the targeted language and culture-simulating situations that [they] might encounter on the battlefield.”¹⁰⁶ The model of preparing the Iraqi Security Forces reflected a three-phased

approach: first, US forces would advise and train their counterparts; second, an American combat unit in theater would ‘partner’ with the ISF to show them what right looks like; third, when practicable, the ISF would lead combat missions against insurgents.¹⁰⁷ US advisors would live and train with their ISF counterparts and be available at all hours for training and discussion.¹⁰⁸ In doing so, both the Americans and the Iraqis would develop the trust and confidence in one another wherein advice would be accepted and implemented. Additionally, these US advisors would draft monthly reports, focusing on measures of performance and effectiveness.¹⁰⁹ The belief of the Army and the Marine Corps was for advisors to live with the ISF and help them develop their own sense of a professional military.

Even after General Petraeus led the re-write of the Army Field Manual for Counterinsurgency Operations (FM 3-24) in this same vein, US advisors once again met with growing frustration and lethargy. First, the ISF quickly reverted to a traditional, hierarchical culture focused on control of subordinates. Evident in this behavior is the very fabric of a tribal society. Second, since it is the vestige of a Soviet-trained force, the ISF has been very slow to adopt a professional Non-Commissioned Officer Corps in the British and American tradition.¹¹⁰ Third, culture and language continue to confound the Americans. Very few US troops have any working knowledge of the Arabic language, and perhaps even less of its culture.¹¹¹ Fourth, Bremer and the CPA opted for the ISF to be trained, not by Special Forces, but largely by contractors and reserve component Soldiers.¹¹² Finally, corruption is rampant within Iraqi society. Many Soldiers and Marines are shocked by the amount of graft, kickbacks, and pilferage that is replete in Iraq—often with the US forces receiving the blame from Iraqis.¹¹³ Thus by 2006, the

US had developed an ISF with growing proficiency in counterinsurgency and checkpoint operations, but was still largely incapable of conducting major combat operations against a conventional force.

By the end of 2006, officials in the Bush Administration concluded that Iraq was slowly devolving into a civil war. President Bush decided on a surge of over twenty thousand additional troops to defeat Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI), root out the sectarian violence, and pave the way for training and transitioning to the ISF.¹¹⁴ After quelling the violence in neighborhoods around the Iraqi capital, the US forces would transition combat operations to the ISF and rotate out US brigade combat teams (BCTs) in favor of advisory and assistance brigades (AABs).¹¹⁵ President Bush turned to Ambassador Ryan Crocker and General Petraeus to lead the civilian and military aspects of the surge, respectively, and to jointly engage with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.¹¹⁶ One significant development was a focus on tribes and tribal allegiance, vice thinking of Iraqis as Sunni, Shi'a, or Kurd. General Raymond Odierno, then commander of Multi-National Corps-Iraq, remembers that "Partnered with the ISF, our operations fragmented what were once well-established AQI support zones, disrupted the network's operations, and forced its leaders...to shift their bases elsewhere."¹¹⁷ US advisors concurrently drilled the ISF extensively on checkpoint operations, cordon and search, and clear and hold tactics. Furthermore, the advise and assist mission expanded to include logistics, procurements, de-mining operations, post-blast forensics, contracting and services, and human resources.¹¹⁸

In a new development, the Americans have also begun to turn increasingly to private corporations to train the ISF. Under this construct, the Americans have taken a

quasi-military approach, with US Servicemen doing the advising and contractors conducting the training.¹¹⁹ The exigency for this was the dissolution of the old Iraqi Army and the resulting rush to man, equip, and train the new ISF to fill the vacuum as US forces battled the insurgents.¹²⁰ Subjecting US Foreign Policy to much international scrutiny for employing ‘mercenaries,’ this reliance on contractors also removes military expertise from the realm of Congressional oversight and public accountability.¹²¹ However, it also provided a much needed economy of force in the train and advise mission in order to allow surge units to destroy or capture insurgents.¹²²

Notwithstanding the debate over the prudence of employing contractors, the US forces continued with the training, partnering, and transitioning with the ISF. By 2009, the US Marines departed Iraq and US Army units over watched the ISF as it assumed the lead for maintaining security.¹²³ In May 2010, US President Barak Obama declared “We will end the combat mission in Iraq by the end of Aug 2010. We will continue to train, equip, and advise Iraqi Security Forces...we will remove all of our troops from Iraq by the end of 2011.”¹²⁴ While the ISF displays fairly good competency to conduct counterinsurgency operations, many worry over its ability to defend Iraq against a conventional or hybrid threat from any of its neighbors. As of this writing in February 2011, the conflict in Iraq has not yet successfully terminated; correspondingly, the end result of the US advisory mission in Iraq remains yet to be written.

A Reckoning

The United States certainly has not undercut the tremendous responsibilities and broad range of tasks when training and advising foreign military forces during conflict. All three of these conflicts demonstrate the eagerness of the American Serviceman to enhance and professionalize the capabilities of his allies. Enduring the same hardships,

travails, dangers, and privations, the US advisor has dealt with a myriad of frustration, misunderstanding, and oftentimes, corruption.

Recurring themes for US advisors include language and cultural difficulties, lack of a common procurement methodology, and delays or subservience of the advisory mission until regular US forces complete the fight against the enemy. Additionally, while the US correctly identified the icon of culture in Korea and Iraq—the family and the tribe, respectively—we failed to understand the importance of the village in Vietnamese society until it was too late. Likewise, the theater commander's approach has created a marked imprint on the course of the advise and train mission. The US failed to employ any sort of independent or external evaluation to gauge the foreign units it has trained. While US regular forces from all services undergo periodic external evaluations—particularly before deployments—this same scrutiny seems devoid for foreign forces under US tutelage.

Following such a survey, several conclusions become clear. First, US advisors require specific training in language, culture, and customs. Relationships with the supported force are critical to accepting the advisor's recommendations. Second, advisors must understand the theater commander's approach. This allows for clear guidance and greater understanding between the advisor and the supported force. Third, the advise and train mission as a whole benefits from close relations between US political and military leaders with the head of state of the host nation. These recommendations would better posture US advisors for success in this vital mission, and are echoed in the Army and Marine Corps' latest counterinsurgency manual.¹²⁵ In

this way, US advisors can attain the accord as described in the quote from Sir Edward Gibbon that began this research paper.

As the US continues to prosecute the war in Afghanistan and prepare for future conflicts, the training of foreign military forces will endure as a central line of operation. That we will continue to allocate personnel, resources, time, and energy into this endeavor is beyond question. US commanders must incorporate this endeavor into their operational approach to achieve their desired end state. The challenge for US forces will be to increase our collective awareness of the strains and stresses—and to get this mission into the eye of the commander—in order to successfully resolve conflicts and gain a better peace.

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